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Heart-healthy diet: 8 steps to prevent heart disease

Ready to start your heart-healthy diet? Here are eight tips to get you started.

[By Mayo Clinic Staff](#)

You might know that eating certain foods can raise your heart disease risk. Even though changing your eating habits can be tough, you can take simple steps to get started today. Whether you've been eating unhealthy for years or you simply want to fine-tune your diet, here are eight heart-healthy diet tips. Find out which foods to eat more of and which foods to limit. You'll soon be on your way toward a healthier diet for your heart.

1. Control portion sizes

How much you eat is just as important as what you eat. Overloading your plate, taking seconds and eating until you feel stuffed can lead to eating more calories than you should. Portions served in restaurants often are larger than anyone needs.

Follow a few simple tips to control food portion size. These tips can help you shape up your diet as well as your heart and waistline:

- Use a small plate or bowl to help control your portions.
- Eat more low-calorie, nutrient-rich foods such as fruits and vegetables.
- Eat smaller amounts of high-calorie, high-sodium foods. These include refined, processed and fast foods.

It's also important to keep track of the number of servings you eat. Keep these points in mind:

- A serving size is a specific amount of food. It's defined by common measurements such as cups, ounces or pieces. For example, one serving of pasta is about 1/3 to 1/2 cup, or about the size of a fist. A serving of meat, fish or chicken is about 2 to 3 ounces. That's about the size and thickness of a deck of cards.
- The recommended number of servings in a food group may vary. It depends on the specific diet or guidelines you're following.

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- Judging serving size is a learned skill. You may need to use measuring cups and spoons or a scale until you're comfortable with your judgment.

2. Eat more vegetables and fruits

Vegetables and fruits are good sources of vitamins and minerals. They're also low in calories and rich in fiber. Vegetables and fruits, like other plants or plant-based foods, contain substances that may help prevent heart disease. Eating more fruits and vegetables also may help you eat less higher calorie food. Some examples of high-calorie foods are meat, cheese and snack foods.

Getting more vegetables and fruits in your diet can be easy. Keep vegetables washed and cut in your refrigerator for quick snacks. Keep fruit in a bowl in your kitchen so that you'll remember to eat it. Choose recipes that have vegetables or fruits as the main ingredients. These include vegetable stir-fry dishes or fresh fruit mixed into salads.

Fruits and vegetables to choose

- Fresh or frozen vegetables and fruits.
- Low-sodium canned vegetables.
- Canned fruit packed in 100% juice or water.

Fruits and vegetables to limit

- Coconut.
- Vegetables with creamy sauces.
- Fried or breaded vegetables.
- Canned fruit packed in heavy syrup.
- Frozen fruit with sugar added.

3. Choose whole grains

Whole grains are good sources of fiber and other nutrients that play roles in heart health and controlling blood pressure. You can get more whole grains by making simple swaps with refined grain products. Or try a whole grain you haven't had before. Healthy choices include whole-grain farro, quinoa and barley. At least half of the grains you eat should be whole grains.

Grain products to choose

- Whole-wheat flour.
- Whole-grain bread, preferably 100% whole-wheat bread or 100% whole-grain bread.
- High-fiber cereal with 5 g or more fiber in a serving.
- Whole grains such as brown rice, barley and buckwheat (kasha).
- Whole-grain pasta.

Grain products to limit or avoid

- White, refined flour.
- White bread.
- Muffins.
- Frozen waffles.
- Cornbread.
- Doughnuts.
- Biscuits.
- Quick breads.
- Cakes.
- Pies.
- Egg noodles.
- Buttered popcorn.

- Oatmeal (steel-cut or regular).
- High-fat snack crackers.

4. Limit unhealthy fats

Limit the amount of saturated and trans fats you eat. This helps lower your blood cholesterol and lower your risk of a common heart condition called coronary artery disease. A high blood cholesterol level can lead to a buildup of plaques in the arteries, called atherosclerosis. And that can raise the risk of heart attack and stroke.

The American Heart Association offers these guidelines for how much fat to include in a heart-healthy diet:

Type of fat	Recommendation
Saturated fat	Less than 6% of total daily calories. If you're eating 2,000 calories a day, that's about 11 to 13 grams.
Trans fat	Stay away from them.

Note: The 2020-2025 Dietary Guidelines for Americans recommend limiting saturated fat to less than 10% of total daily calories.

There are simple ways to cut back on saturated and trans fats for a heart-healthy diet:

- Trim fat from meat or choose lean meats with less than 10% fat.
- Use less butter, margarine and shortening when cooking and serving.
- Use low-fat substitutions when you can. For example, top a baked potato with low-sodium salsa or low-fat yogurt rather than butter. Or use sliced whole fruit or low-sugar fruit spread on toast instead of margarine.

Check the food labels of cookies, cakes, frostings, crackers and chips. These foods are low on nutrition. And some of them — even those labeled reduced fat — may contain trans fats. Trans fats can no longer be added to foods in the United States. But they could be in products made in other countries. Trans fats may be listed as partially hydrogenated oil on the ingredient label. Also, many of the partially hydrogenated fats or trans fats typically contained in desserts and snack foods have been replaced with saturated fats. So it's still a good idea to limit those foods.

Fats to choose	Fats to limit
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Olive oil.• Canola oil.• Vegetable and nut oils.• Margarine, trans fat free.• Cholesterol-lowering margarine, such as	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Butter.• Lard.• Bacon fat.• Gravy.• Cream sauce.• Nondairy creamers.



- Benecol, Promise Activ or Smart Balance.
- Nuts and seeds.
- Avocados.
- Hydrogenated margarine and shortening.
- Cocoa butter, found in chocolate.
- Coconut, palm, cottonseed and palm kernel oils.

When you use fats, choose unsaturated ones. There are two main types. Monounsaturated fats are found in products such as olive oil or canola oil. Polyunsaturated fats are found in certain fish and in avocados, nuts and seeds. When used in place of saturated fats, unsaturated fats may help lower your total blood cholesterol. But it's still important to limit how much of these fats you eat. All types of fats are high in calories.

An easy way to add healthy fat — and fiber — to your diet is to use ground flaxseed. Flaxseeds are small brown seeds that are high in fiber and healthy fats called omega-3 fatty acids. Studies have shown that flaxseed lowers unhealthy cholesterol levels in some people. You can grind flaxseeds in a coffee grinder or food processor. Then stir a teaspoon of the ground flaxseed into yogurt, applesauce or hot cereal.

5. Choose low-fat protein sources

Lean meat, poultry and fish; low-fat or fat-free dairy products; and eggs are some of the best sources of protein. Choose lower fat options, such as skinless chicken breasts rather than fried chicken patties. And choose skim milk rather than whole milk.

Fish is healthier than high-fat meats. Certain types of fish are rich in omega-3 fatty acids, which can lower blood fats called triglycerides. You'll find the highest amounts of omega-3 fatty acids in cold-water fish, such as salmon, mackerel and herring. Other sources are flaxseed, walnuts, soybeans and canola oil.

Legumes — beans, peas and lentils — also are good low-fat sources of protein. They contain no cholesterol, making them good substitutes for meat. Eating plant protein instead of animal protein lowers the amounts of fat and cholesterol you take in. It also boosts how much fiber you get.

Proteins to choose	Proteins to limit or avoid
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- Low-fat or fat-free dairy products, such as skim or low-fat (1%) milk, yogurt and cheese.
- Eggs.
- Fish, especially fatty, cold-water fish, such as salmon.
- Skinless poultry.
- Legumes.
- Soybeans and soy products, such as soy burgers and tofu.
- Lean ground meats.
- Full-fat milk and other dairy products.
- Organ meats, such as liver.
- Fatty and marbled meats.
- Spareribs.
- Hot dogs and sausages.
- Bacon.
- Fried or breaded meats.

6. Limit and reduce sodium and salt

Sodium is a mineral. It's found naturally in some foods, such as celery or milk. Food makers also may add sodium to processed foods, such as bread and soup. Eating foods with lots of added sodium can lead to high blood pressure. So can using table salt, which contains sodium.

High blood pressure is a risk factor for heart disease. Limiting salt and sodium is a key part of a heart-healthy diet. The American Heart Association recommends that adults:

- Have no more than 2,300 milligrams (mg) of sodium a day. That's about a teaspoon of salt.
- Ideally have no more than 1,500 mg of sodium a day

Limiting the amount of salt you add to food at the table or while cooking is a good first step. But much of the sodium you eat comes from canned or processed foods. These include soups, baked goods and frozen dinners. Eat fresh foods and make your own soups and stews to lower the amount of sodium you eat.

If you like the convenience of canned soups and prepared meals, buy products with reduced sodium or no added salt. Be wary of foods that claim to be lower in sodium. They may have less sodium than the original recipe but still be high in sodium. You may wonder if sea salt is a better option than regular table salt. Sea salt has the same nutrition as regular salt.

Another way to eat less sodium is to choose your condiments carefully. Many condiments are available in reduced-sodium versions. Salt substitutes can add flavor to your food with less sodium.

Low-sodium items to choose

- Herbs and spices.
- Salt-free seasoning blends.
- Canned soups or prepared meals with reduced sodium or no added salt.

High-sodium items to limit or avoid

- Table salt.
- Canned soups and prepared foods, such as frozen dinners.
- Tomato juice.
- Condiments such as ketchup, mayonnaise and

- Reduced-sodium versions of condiments, such as reduced-sodium soy sauce and reduced-sodium ketchup.
- Restaurant meals.

7. Plan ahead: Create daily menus

Create daily menus using the six tips listed above. When you choose foods for each meal and snack, focus on vegetables, fruits and whole grains. Choose lean proteins and healthy fats, and limit salty foods. Watch your portion sizes and add variety to your menu choices.

For example, if you have grilled salmon one evening, try a black bean burger the next night. This helps ensure that you'll get all of the nutrients the body needs. Variety also makes meals and snacks more interesting.

8. Have a treat once in a while

It's OK to treat yourself every now and then. A candy bar or handful of potato chips won't derail your heart-healthy diet. But don't let treats turn into an excuse for giving up on your healthy-eating plan. If you overeat treats once in a while rather than often, you'll balance things out over the long term. What's important is that you eat healthy foods most of the time.

In general, limit added sugar to less than 10% of your daily calories. For example, if you take in about 2,000 calories a day, 10% of that amount is 200 calories. And 200 calories of added sugar equals 50 grams of the sugar added to the foods you eat. Do not give food and drinks with added sugar to children younger than 2 years old.

If you follow these eight tips, you'll likely find that heart-healthy eating is something you can do and enjoy. With planning and a few simple food swaps, you can eat with your heart in mind.

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